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BRANDING FUNDAMENTALS FOR SUCCESSFUL STARTUPS

Précis:

Startup companies frequently need professional branding services before they can afford to pay for them. This article suggests 7 core principles that startups can follow to avoid costly mis-steps and create a coherent visual image. Central concepts: revenue vs. equity, the brand brief, consistency, naming, typography, research, competitive analysis, color schemes, and intellectual property protection, and transitioning from startup to professional brand.

Eureka! You've got a brilliant, disruptive, innovative business concept, and you're ready to start building an exceptional organization around it. In a perfect world, you would have the cash to hire a blue-blood legal team and a red-hot branding firm, and roll out your identity out, fully media-ready, from day one.

In the real world... the funding isn't in place yet, and you still need to get your brand going. Until you can afford a professional branding relationship, here are some tried and true fundamentals that will help you make good choices early.

Make clean code: Creating a solid brand is analogous to creating code: Clean, well-conceived code runs great; sloppy code, though, once you release it, takes way more effort to support and upgrade it. Nothing but trouble later on. *The same applies to branding:* It's much harder to fix a poorly crafted brand after it is out in the public consciousness, yet it is surprising how many companies do just that. So often we hear some variant of this lame refrain: "We know our brand isn't right. Nobody here likes it. But it's out there, and if we change it, we'll lose our brand equity--nobody will know who we are." It's faulty reasoning, yet it holds down the growth of too many otherwise worthy companies. Please sidestep this quagmire!

1) Revenue vs. Equity: Your business idea is how you make revenue and profit. Your brand, on the other hand, is how you get paid for the risk, the hard work, and the personal sacrifice of starting your own show. There is no reason to invest in building a brand unless you can a return of at least 100 times your investment. You won't have customers without a good product and pricing; similarly, you won't be able to sell your equity stake for full value, without a strong brand portfolio. Understanding this relationship is the basis for all the other steps.



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2) Branding is a long game. It's not a matter of 'one, and you're done.' You build, adapt, refine, and update it over multiple market cycles. In the same way you create a financial pro forma for your business model, I encourage you to create an outline that explains, in very simple terms how you would like your company to be perceived. Different branding gurus have different names for this step, some call it "discovery," others "the platform;" at Brandbook, we call this a "Branding Brief"—the basic idea is to distill down to its essence what makes your outfit unique, state persuasively its driving convictions and passions, explain how it transforms lives. Out of this come all the other choices.

ethos: *what you and your founding partners believe: The shared values that drive your company forward.*

competitive strategy: *The mother lode for devising a competitive strategy is still Michael Porter's book on the subject.*

3) The Work of Knowing: Poet Robert Frost wrote about doing the hard work of knowing; and anyone with a business idea needs to heed the bard. There are two sides to this knowing: Internal and external. *Internal knowing*, of course, is establishing one's own values and ethos—what you and your founding partners believe; the shared values that drive your company forward. *External knowing* is every bit as important—who's out there competing for the same revenue base. Don't fall into the delusional idea that "We're so new and different we have no competition." No matter how disruptive or original your idea, you have competition from somewhere. An example of a specific type of branding brief we use in positioning expertise-based enterprises. The figure on the next page is from the recent rebranding of the Oral History Association, an academic organization with international membership. There are many ways to study an organization and its relationship to the market—a good branding company will have sophisticated methods, but devise your own to start with. More on competitive strategy later.

4) Branding is about equity (AKA cash money!): Branding isn't only what your company looks like; it is a tool for monetizing the value in every aspect of your new organization—including some that might not be obvious at the outset. Let me give you an example: I did a startup branding package in 1997 for a solo entrepreneur- one person, a laptop, and a visionary idea to transform the process of building. In doing the exploratory interviews, we realized that, even though there was only one revenue model, he had



Oral History and OHA Benefits to Society

MAJOR ACTIVITIES IN THE ORAL HISTORY COMMUNITY

SEEKING

Individuals with stories to tell.
 Oral Historians seeking interviewees with specific experiences.
 Establishing relationships between interviewees and interviewers
 Educators using OH as a teaching method.

COLLECTING

Recording Interviews
 Obtaining necessary permissions and copyrights.
 Applying Best Practices to technical, legal and ethical OH practices.

STORING & SHARING

Archiving OH assets
 Establishing Collections
 Protecting and preserving media
 Best Practices for digitization of analog media
 Facilitating retrieval (eg. meta-tagging)
 Arranging, describing, transcribing

PRESENTING

Sharing Stories
 Collaborating on creation of exhibits, shows, media content.
 Working with other disciplines to develop an audience for narrative forms.
 Working with institutions and venues where the public can experience OH.

INTERPRETING

Studying groups of OH assets for connections
 Critical analysis of OH and its contribution to world events.
 Drawing conclusions about events based on first hand narratives.
 Studying the nature of memory itself. "How we remember is as important as what we remember."

BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

Identify life experience stories with historical value.
 Affirms the importance of truth and transparency in human progress.
 Expands the Historical Record.

Satisfies deep human longing to share and narrate.
 Encourages Active Listening.
 High Quality recordings capture of context and details
 Oral Historians cares for the needs of future audiences.

Provide multiple viewpoints
 Preserves and safeguards OH Assets
 Fosters the sense of one's own roots & place in History
 Provides tools for understanding and connecting communities and affinity groups.

Makes OH assets accessible
 Facilitates research and scholarship
 Connect disparate interviews and provide new historical insights.
 Adaptable to many formats and Media
 Sonic and Aural aspects of voices

***OH is a democratizing force:
 OH bears witness to the full range of experience.
 Affirms individual dignity:
 "Everyone's life story is extraordinary."
 Informs politics, education and public policy.
 Places individuals in larger social and cultural context***

Publicizes need for technical, methodological and ethical best practices.
 Draws lay practitioners into contact with professionals.
 Publicizes notable initiatives.
 Meetingplace for groups with common interests to broaden and enrich topics.

Supports OH professionals in their craft.
 Provides network for shared interests & resources.
 Promotes respect for contribution of interviewees.
 Identify local and regional resources.
 Match potential narrators with appropriate historians.

Publicizes & promotes OH as a profession;
 Extends knowledge of OH to allied disciplines
 Promotes value of OH in non-academic areas, e.g. conflict resolution
 Provides bridge between procurers and users of Oral History

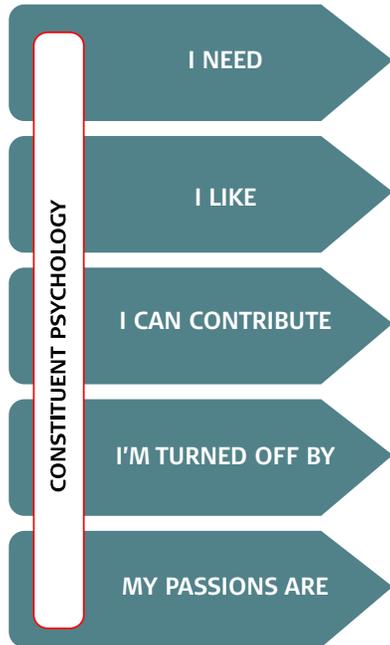
Provides clearing house for archivists & libraries.
 Promotes access & works for interoperability of OH databases
 Spotlights and publicizes new projects and new collections.
 Provides mentoring and training programs at many levels.
 Engages in partnerships with other organizations.

***OHA is a vital support network for Oral Historians at all phases of their career and work.
 OHA Advocates for Oral History
 Demonstrates value of OH as community building tool
 Demonstrates important role of OH in democratic governance.***

THE ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION'S ROLE



OHA'S MAIN AUDIENCES (Member And Prospective Member Constituents)



	O.H. PROFESSIONALS includes academics, archivists, also freelancers	OTHER PROFESSIONS CREATING & USING O.H. eg. Museum Professionals, Anthropologists, Truth & Reconciliation groups	RELATED PROFESSIONS using and managing O.H. assets, e.g. archivists, researchers.	LAY PRACTITIONERS Secondary School Educators & Students, Community groups, Geneologists.
I NEED	PROFESSIONAL NETWORK, FUNDING, CAREER ADVANCEMENT, ADVANCED INFORMATION RECOGNITION & VALIDATION	TECHINICAL SKILLS RESOURCES TO DO MY PROJECT PROFESSIONAL NETWORK FUNDING	KNOWLEDGE OF OH TECHINICAL SKILLS PROFESSIONAL NETWORK MANAGABLE DATA	RESOURCES, TRAINING SUPPORTIVE MENTORING
I LIKE	STIRRING NARRATIVE SENSE OF COMMUNITY SOCIALIZING WITH PEERS THEORY & ETHICS OF OH	LEARNING HOW OH ADVANCES MY WORK & STANDING VALIDATION REGULAR PRECIS OF OH NEWS	HELPING PEOPLE FIND RESOURCES MAINTAINING ORDER ADVANCING EDUCATION	PAY ATTENTION TO ME FREE RESOURCES FINDING A MENTOR SOCIALIZING
I CAN CONTRIBUTE	KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, INTERPRETATION, MENTORING, CREATIVITY, OH INTERVIEWS OH PROJECT MANAGEMENT	OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE ACCESS TO NEW POPULATIONS SOURCES OF FUNDING. EXPANDED MANDATE	TRAINING EXPANDED PROF. NETWORKS KNOWLEDGE OF INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE	ENTHUSIASM, ENERGY VOLUNTEER LABOR FRESH PERSPECTIVE
I'M TURNED OFF BY	STORY CORPS DILLITENTES MISUSE/ABUSE OF OH	TOO MUCH THEORY; OH IS A TOOL TO ME	TOO TOUCHY FEELY; TOO MUCH THEORY; EXCLUSIVITY.	CLUBBY ADAMOSHERE; EXPENSIVE TRAVEL/ EXTRA COSTS
MY PASSIONS ARE	COLLECTING STORIES GIVING VOICE TO EVERYONE ENRICHING HISTORY SOCIAL JUSTICE	PROBABLY LIES OUTSIDE OH HIGHLY VARIABLE; COLLECTING STORIES HUMANITIES	HELPING OTHERS FIND RESOURCES; EDUCATION; CULTURAL DIALOGUE (MAY SHARE PASSION FOR OH OR MAY NOT.)	MANY AND VARIED SOCIAL CAUSES, GENEOLGY, USE OF OH FOR ALTERNATIVE ED.

OHA'S VALUE PROPOSITION

1) COMMUNITY 2) PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT 3) NEWS, STIMULATING IDEAS 4) TRAINING 5) ADVOCACY	1) COMMUNITY 2) PROFESSIONAL NETWORK 3) TRAINING & RESOURCES	1) COMMUNITY 2) PROFESSIONAL NETWORK 3) TRAINING & RESOURCES	1) WEB SITE/OH BASICS 2) TRAINING & RESOURCES 3) ENCOURAGEMENT / AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT
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MAIN TOUCHPOINTS (places where people experience the OHA brand)

CONTACT WITH OHA MEMBERS ANNUAL CONFERENCE WEB SITE & SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLICATIONS	CONTACT WITH OHA MEMBERS WEB SITE PUBLICATIONS ANNUAL CONFERENCE	CONTACT WITH OHA MEMBERS WEB SITE PUBLICATIONS (?) ANNUAL CONFERENCE (?)	CONTACT WITH MEMBERS WEB SITE OUTREACH BY OHA MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE
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Arial Calibri Times

I've heard people say "We don't bother about typestyles, we just use whatever, because nobody can tell the difference." It's a misconception only newbies buy into.

Consistent use of a legible typestyle—even if it is Arial—is 1000 times better than a menagerie of styles.

Better still is a consistent use of a typestyle that fits the zeitgeist of your venture.

SignaPRO Family
Light & Italic
Book & Italic
Bold & Italic
Black & Italic

a unique analytical method worth promoting and protecting. We created a master brand for his company, with a separate but related trademark for his proprietary process. Within 5 years, he had productized this process as SAAS and sold it to a larger company; this helped him capitalize the expansion of his core business.

4) Basic Components: In start-up mode, keep your public image simple and consistent. To stand the best chance of success, a startup brand needs to look stable and sure-footed. That means controlling the things you can control, making them consistent but not rigid.

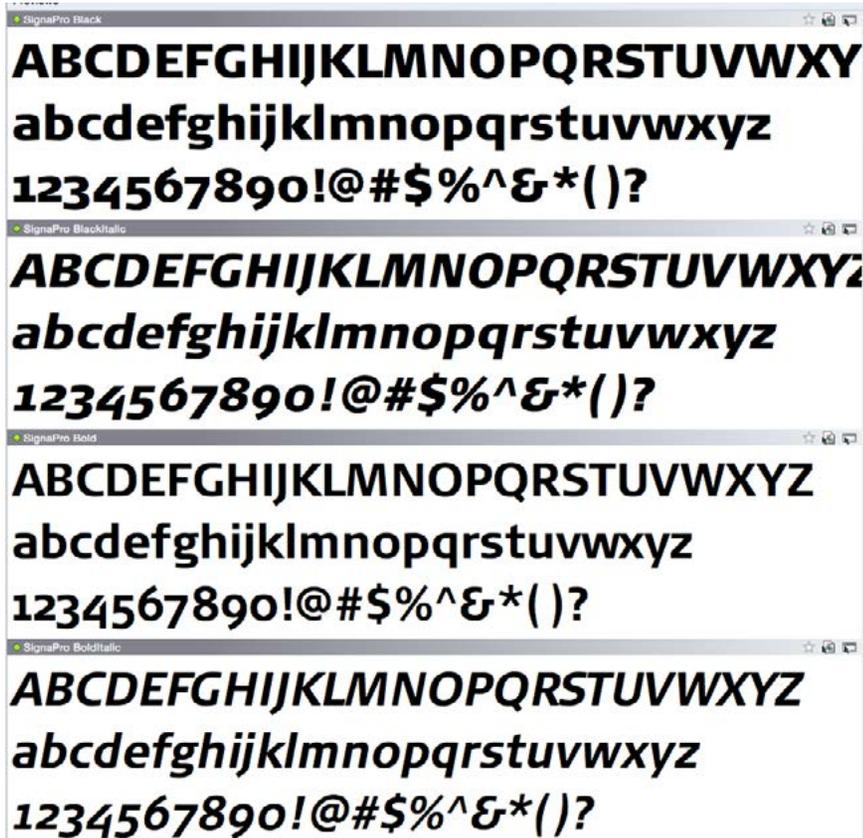
Typography 101: Pick a typeface family and stay with it for your startup stage. The easy thing is to pick one that is standard; Arial, Times, etc. If you go this route, you will have no trouble matching fonts regardless of the communications channel you need, so you will get consistency—but not much recognition.

Your typeface has subliminal power. Typography is a powerful part of your brand precisely because it flies just below the radar of peoples consciousness. They recognize the patterns of a typeface without really being aware of it. Think of the Coca-Cola script and tell me that nobody notices it. Apple uses a wonderful clean serif type style throughout their corporate marketing (a custom variant of the classic French type style Garamond). Subtle, subliminal, it is a persuasive part of their brand. If you're in a market space where recognition is important, using one of the everyday standard fonts probably won't get you there. Consider adopting one that is less commonly used so you get some uniqueness to your communications.

An example —by no means the only one—is SignaPro, a very simple, legible font family. I use it as an example because it has several important features you need to build a coherent brand:

a) *serif and sans serif.* It's not crucial, but it's very valuable to have both serif and sans serif versions in the same family

b) *a variety of weights-* at a minimum you need a light, a bold, a light italic, and a bold italic. Ideally, you would like to have at least 8 fonts in its family—light, medium, bold and black with a roman and an italic for each



SignaPro is just one of a number of recent sans-serif families that strike a good balance of uniqueness and legibility; also have a large enough family of weights and special characters to go global easily. You'll have to pay a few hundred bucks for the font license, but it's possibly the best initial investment in your brand you can make.

Some other type families you might want to consider that have the requisite characteristics discussed above:

- Titillium Family
- The Serif / The Sans / The Mix
- Dax, Meta
- Optima, Legacy Sans

A great place to look for new type face releases and suggestions is Jeremiah Shoaf's site Typewolf.com

Stay away from free fonts—pick one and pay for the license. Or subscribe to TypeKit or GoogleFonts. (selection is more limited with these later, I prefer the pay-to-play model for branding systems, because fewer other firms will be using the one you pick.



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Avoid a typeface with funky personality.

Understand—I'm not saying these are bad fonts, or that they are never appropriate. Just that, in start-up mode, especially if you 'self-admin' your brand, avoid fonts that are too extraverted, or that have fewer than 4 weights.

weight- this will give you enough of a visual vocabulary to cover most of the things you will need.

c) available in type-kit and open-type formats. This is a large topic, but the basic thing to know is that having a font in both these formats provides a pathway to professional results in print, interactive, web and larger scale branding (like signs) as you grow.

It takes a professional eye to pick an ensemble of type faces that really expresses your company's ethos. Eventually you will have a branding firm or department that crafts your media presence with power and precision. In startup mode, keep it simple, strong, legible, with just a breath of uniqueness, and strive for consistency. This is one of the easiest things—and most powerful—you can do to create a visual identity for your brand—yet one of most often missed. Keep to this discipline and succeed!

A few important caveats:

- Avoid a typeface with funky personality.
- Especially avoid using a multiplicity of fonts.
- I recommend a clear, simple sans serif as your startup default

The Path of Least Resistance Standardize on one of the everyday fonts that load on every computer. This makes consistency easy, albeit at the sacrifice of personality or uniqueness. If you're self-administering, better to start with a consistent but bland image than one that's scattered. But by all means, if you have the discipline, pick a special type family and stay with it.

Naming: Most of the really cool names, and a lot of lesser names that you will think of for your company, are already owned. Get over it! Be prepared to dream up a long list of 100-200 candidates in order to get 2-3 that are unowned. When you get your long list, use one of the global databases of trademarks to check availability. I like [Thomson Reuters Compuscan](#) to cull the list and verify that what you want is not already in use. Using such a database can cost you a thousand dollars, but that's a lot cheaper than a costly fight with another firm that claims primacy over the name you have already invested in! Fewer letters is better than more, words with interesting aural rhythms are good. Pick a name you can own as a URL and trademark—even if



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Study your competitive universe:

Here's a portion of a consensus universe I assembled for a customer in the data network space. This universe studies the use of color in the industry. You can see blue, red, and black are well accepted and trusted. No purple, no yellow, no orange, no brown. Because your future customers already have ideas about who's trustworthy, their consensus opinion is more important than your taste. You can study other attributes of the successful brands in your market space—as well as those you don't want to emulate. This exercise is crucial in making an informed choice and staking out a solid position for your new brand.

it is a nonsense word—you must have something you can own and defend.

Cooler color: Black and white are a de facto part of your brand's visual appearance—for some startups, B&W is the only color scheme needed. If you do need color, choose a dark neutral and a bright color. Think of it like a dark dress outfit with a bright scarf or tie. A branding professional is likely to pick a more nuanced group of colors for your brand when you get there, but for now, we're talking one nice interview outfit, keep it simple.

Competitive Strategy: here's a simple exercise: Search the brands marks of several dozen firms that are in the general industry you're in. Even if you're completely disrupting an industry, your potential customer base is still seeing you as being part of that industry. (To their customers, Tesla is an automobile company; Uber is in the same business as the legacy taxi companies.) Make a grid of these brands. What you then have is a rough consensus of the brand universe for your industry- the backdrop against which you will be seen. So if you want to use the color to make customers feel comfortable choosing your brand, pick a color scheme that's squarely within the consensus universe. Or, if you're a total renegade, pick a color that falls outside the consensus and own it!



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Hear me loud and clear on this: symbols are powerful, having a good one is one of your most important vessels of your brand's equity.

But because they are powerful, don't start with a home-made symbol. Start with a word or name, one that you can own and defend. Add a symbol when you can afford the research and creative needed to do an excellent one.

Symbols: Until you're working with a professional branding firm, we recommend you skip doing a picture or symbol for your brand. Even if you can do something great on your own—which is harder than it looks—someone else probably already owns it. Nearly every business space is crowded with brand images. Trying to find a symbol that is both appropriate to your mission and available is a costly process that will bog you down if you try to do it yourself—the greater peril is that you have to withdraw your use of your branding after you have started using it, or pay royalties for your new symbol because someone has a prior claim on something “confusingly similar.”

SUMMARY: So to stay focused on your core mission, Get a good name, vet it to ensure you can own it, pick a strong simple color scheme, and a bold typographic treatment of it. This will get you out of the gate quickly. You can always add symbols, patterns, tertiary colors, and winged monkeys as needed later, as part of your professionally generated branding program.

Sanity Check: Time-to-market is everything; startups can't always do everything in the ideal sequence. I do emphasize the importance of having an outside branding relationship for two reasons: First, it is very hard to see yourself objectively, even harder to express the essence of your idea in a media-friendly way. Second, your new venture's management will be drinking from the fire hose. Branding is complex, and offloading it to a professional frees up your time for mission critical tasks that you alone can do. Your angel or VC team can advise you on timing for this step.

The Wrap: Your brand is a picture of the promise you make to the world. To make the picture, you have to articulate that promise as clearly as you can. Stay with these foundational guidelines to keep your startup brand simple, clear, and consistent. Balance consistency with flexibility. Review and manage it as you would any major asset. The payoff, over the life cycle of the brand, can be enormous.



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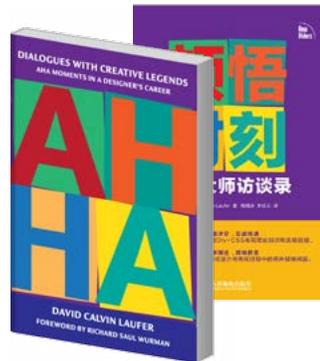
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His book [Dialogues with Creative Legends](#), published in English by Pearson in 2013, also debuted in a Chinese edition in spring 2015.



Short video excerpts from Dialogues with Creative Legends are on

[Brandbook's YouTube channel](#)

Read a longer excerpt on [Design Intelligence](#)

Note: portions of this article appeared in Hypepotamus, the newsletter for Atlanta's tech startup community.